

Why is Canada's ruling elite commemorating the Boer War?

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As part of the annual Remembrance Day ceremonies held on November 11th, Canada's National War Memorial in Ottawa was rededicated to include Canadian soldiers who perished in the Boer War (1899-1902, also known as the South African War) and in the Afghan War.

Forty thousand Canadian troops participated in the latter conflict, over thirteen years beginning in late 2001 and ending only this past spring, making the Afghan War Canada's longest-ever war. In terms of lives lost, it was far and away Canada's costliest since the Korean War, with 158 troop fatalities.

The rededication ceremony was led by Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Governor-General David Johnston—the titular head of Canada's armed forces and the representative of Canada's monarch, the British Queen—and included the participation of a second representative of the monarchy, Princess Anne.

Rather than the entirely legitimate wish of broad sections of the population to reflect on the tremendous losses and senseless waste of these wars, the rededication was aimed at furthering the government's drive to develop a bellicose, explicitly rightwing Canadian nationalism to provide ideological support for an increasingly aggressive imperialist foreign policy.

In the days preceding the long-planned rededication, Harper had sought to exploit the killings of two Canadian Armed Forces' personnel by lone, deeply troubled individuals, claiming that Canada was under terrorist attack so as to rally support for Canada's participation in the new US-led Mid East War and justify further attacks on Canadians' democratic rights.

The fact that the Boer War, a brutal, colonial conflict is being commemorated as a noble, national cause confirms that what is involved is a political-ideological offensive by the ruling elite to legitimize new and even bloodier crimes in the face of a population which is overwhelmingly hostile to war.

The Boer War was fought by the British to annex two Boer-dominated republics in South Africa, Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Britain's aims were explicitly imperialist, above all consolidating control of the region's rich gold and diamond resources without having to pay taxes to the local Boer governments. As part of the British Empire, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were asked to contribute troops to the British expedition.

The war saw the largest deployment of Canadian troops abroad from Confederation in 1867 to the beginning of the First World War. Over 7,300 Canadian soldiers were involved in combat operations in South Africa, leading to a total of 270 deaths.

The conflict was conducted with extreme ruthlessness. Having failed to crush Boer resistance through bloody battlefield encounters, the

British forces and their allies rounded up much of the civilian population and subjected them to imprisonment in concentration camps. It was the first time concentration camps had been used in the course of a military conflict. More than twenty thousand prisoners, almost all of them women and children, died in the camps due to malnourishment and disease.

J. A. Hobson, the English economist whose work Lenin drew on in the development of his theory of imperialism, described the Boer War as a “conflict orchestrated by and fought for the preservation of finance capitalism at the expense of the working class.”

Even at the time, Canada's participation in such a brazen act of aggressive colonial violence was disputed within the political elite. Serious divisions emerged within the governing Liberal Party, with Henri Bourassa resigning his House of Commons seat in protest and in the ensuing years mobilizing French-Canadian opposition to what he termed a “barbaric war.” The widespread opposition to Canada's participation was expressed in the rioting that convulsed parts of Montreal for three days in March 1900 and which was only ended when a shaken government deployed the militia.

The Boer War was one of a series of wars and war crises that prepared the way for World War One. Britain was shaken by the inability of its army to win a quick victory and by its diplomatic isolation—the other great powers denounced Britain for invading internationally recognized states on patently trumped-up grounds. London responded by embarking on a major military modernization campaign and by seeking a rapprochement with France, its traditional rival, to confront a rising Germany. Canada's elite, for its part, steadily increased its contribution to “imperial defense” in the decade following the Boer War and when World War One erupted rallied round the British Empire, which it viewed as the best means to assert its interests on the world stage.

That the National War Memorial red edication took place on the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, in which over 60,000 Canadians died, was not happenstance. As elsewhere, Canada's capitalist elite is trying to use the centenary to promote its present-day predatory agenda. In a bellicose speech delivered in August, Prime Minister Harper celebrated Canada's role in the First World War, saying the slaughter had secured Canada a place at the table of the great powers, that is, a say in the repartition of the world and a share of the spoils of markets, resources and, profits. (See: Canada's Harper marks World War I with bellicose address)

The “rededication's” twinning of the Boer War with the Afghan War was fitting: both were colonial-style counter-insurgency wars waged to further imperialist interests. Through the Afghan War, the US seized a strategic beachhead in a country that is in the center of oil-

rich Central Asia and proximate to Russia, China and Iran—states Washington views as major strategic competitors.

Canada's elite, for its part, seized on the Afghan War as a means of pursuing its own imperialist agenda: using it as a means to solidify its strategic partnership with the US and to orchestrate a major political-ideological shift, putting paid to the ruling-class myth of Canada as a peacekeeper and acclimatizing the population to the shedding of blood in defence of Canada's "values" and "national interests."

Canada's Liberal government ordered the Canadian Armed Forces to join the US's illegal 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. And in early 2003, it agreed to assist the US, which was in the midst of preparing its invasion of Iraq, by assuming a major role in the US's Kabul-based "stabilization force." A little over two years later, in the summer of 2005, Canada took on an even larger role in the counter-insurgency war when Canadian troops took command in Kandahar, a center of the Taliban resistance to the foreign occupation of Afghanistan.

While the Liberals led Canada into war in Afghanistan, and all parties in the House of Commons, including the ostensibly pro-peace NDP, supported the deployment to Kandahar, the Harper Conservatives on taking office in 2006 placed it front and center of the government's agenda and political messaging. Within weeks of becoming prime minister, Harper traveled to Afghanistan to show support for the troops. With Kandahar serving as the back-drop, Harper declared his government would not "cut and run" from its commitment to subjugating Afghanistan and touted Canada's frontline role in the counter-insurgency war as emblematic of a more robust Canadian foreign policy. "You can't lead from the bleachers," declared Harper. "I want Canada to be a leader ... A country that really leads ... on global issues."

In 2008 the Conservative government invoked the Afghan War as one of its main arguments in support of a massive expansion of the Canadian military's fire-power under its "Canada First" military-defence program. Harper also placed the war at the center of his government's drive to revive a militarist nationalism. Time and again over the past eight years Harper has celebrated Canada as a "warrior" nation and promoted the patently false and ultra-reactionary notion that Canadians' freedoms were won by the military.

Historically, the National War Memorial has been used by the political establishment to promote the myth of national unity in preparation for military conflict. The memorial was originally dedicated by King George VI in the spring of 1939, just six months before the outbreak of the Second World War. Uncomfortably conscious of the mass opposition which developed to the imposition of conscription in World War I, ruling circles utilized the King's visit to whip up feelings of patriotism and loyalty to Britain in preparations for the coming war. World War II saw Canadian armed forces personnel deployed to virtually every major theatre of conflict.

The prospect of a major war between the imperialist powers is once again being openly discussed. There are numerous flash-points around the globe which could quickly trigger hostilities between nuclear-armed states. Canada is playing an aggressive role in all of them.

Canada's parliament voted on 7 October to join the US's new Mideast war, initially restricting its involvement to a six-month mission. But by the time the first bombs were dropped by Canadian warplanes on November 2, only a week prior to Remembrance Day, military and government representatives were already making no secret of the fact that the intervention will go on much longer.

Immediately after the rededication, Harper flew to the G20 summit

in Brisbane, Australia, where he spearheaded the attack on Russian President Vladimir Putin, blaming him for the escalation of the Ukraine crisis. Canada played a prominent role in supporting the fascist-led coup that toppled Ukraine's elected president last February and has repeatedly called for a more aggressive stand against Russia, including the deployment of Canadian and other NATO forces on Russia's borders.

Canada is also a partner in both the economic and military thrusts of the US's "Pivot to Asia," which aims to strategically isolate and encircle China. Last year the Canadian and US militaries signed a secret pact on operations in the Asia-Pacific and the Canadian Armed Forces is seeking to establish forward bases in South Korea and Singapore. (See: Canada deeply implicated in US anti-China "pivot")

The government's promotion of the military has the full support of the opposition. The trade-union-aligned New Democratic Party (NDP) spent the two weeks leading up to the Remembrance Day ceremonies calling for the day to be turned into a national public holiday commemorating Canada's wars.

The corporate media is equally in support of the government's aggressive, militarist course, as attested by its lavish reportage of the National War Memorial rededication. No prominent media commentator thought it strange that Canada should be honoring a more than century-old imperialist adventure, let alone denounced it as shameful. Yet in recent weeks there have been numerous media voices that have criticized the government for not spending still more billions on the military.

The unanimity within ruling circles in celebrating two brutal imperialist conflicts in the Boer and Afghan Wars should put paid to any lingering belief that Canadian imperialism is somehow less bellicose and predatory than its American and European counterparts. Such claims have always been based on the falsification of Canada's major role in the imperialist wars of the past century, to say nothing of the brutal means by which the Canadian bourgeoisie subjugated the native peoples.

Working people must take serious warning from the ruling elite's campaign to revive its militarist traditions as part of its turn to an ever-more aggressive role on the world stage. A new socialist movement must be built to oppose war by uniting workers internationally in the struggle for the abolition of capitalism, the source of militarism and imperialist war.



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